



The GD Holiday Gift Guide

by Marc Wayner



There were some sweet guitar sounds coming from a wall booth at NAMM so we wandered over to where the sounds were coming from to have a talk with Mike O., the guy behind SWELL Pedals. Talking to Mike at NAMM and since on the phone it's easy to see that he is enthusiastic about his product and making the best tube overdrives possible. SWELL Pedals is actually a line of overdrive pedals for guitar and bass that range from mild overdrive to full-on, no-holds-barred overdrive. We got a G-Valve V.2 for guitar and a B-Pro V.2 for bass to try out. Both considered mid gain boosts. The V.2 is because these are the second generation of Mike's pedals. They have some changes to the voicing based on feedback from users and dealers and some new features he kicked in to the evolution of the pedals.

All of the SWELL overdrives sell for \$299.99 and if you buy from him direct are made just for you. What that means is you get to choose from 17 different colors for the enclosure color, 5 screen colors for the print and 7 different knob colors. That way when you get it you know it's your pedal. Don't know of anyone else doing that. Basic features on all models are the same. First and foremost this is a tube overdrive. The heart of the pedal is a 12AX7 tube run at more than 100 volts with

the enclosed power supply driving the "SWELL voltage multiplier or SVM." "Simply put the SVM converts low voltage AC electrical power to high voltage DC electrical power. This high voltage DC power is required by the vacuum tube designs found in all SWELL products. In comparison the SVM is a fraction of the weight and takes up much less physical space than a transformer. The SVM allows SWELL products to remain small in size and deliver BIG Tube Tone!" according to the web site. There are no clipping



diodes in these babies. Each pedal actually gives you two different overdrives, actually sort of four, more on that later. You get two knobs, one for Drive 1 and one for Drive 2. Simply put each drive works off of a different side of the 12AX7, which is actually two tubes in one. That means you can

set one up for more or less gain than the other. Or the same, but what would be the point of that! You then switch between them with the Drive 2 foot switch. The fact that the pedal runs on a tube means it is easy to tweak. Different 12AX7s from different manufacturers have different characteristics so you can experiment to get what you are looking for. Also you can easily substitute another tube like a 12AT7 or 12AY7 or any other of that ilk and reduce the overdrive and characteristics of the pedal.

There is also a footswitch that kicks the unit on or off. That switch is a true bypass switch so there is no tone sucking when the pedal is off, like with some other pedals. You also get a tone knob that affects the tone of both drives simultaneously and a level control that controls the output level of the entire pedal. New to V.2 are two mini three position toggles. One marked cut, is an overall tone shaper. It has positions for fat, cut and round, all of which change the way the mids are voiced and to me the smoothness of the overdrive. The other mini toggle is marked push. It changes the aggressiveness of the pedal. According to SWELL in the low mode it behaves like a 50 watt head giving it a more focused attack. In the push position it responds like a 100 watt head giving you more low end and smoothing things out. Sweet is the compromise between the two. Here's where you can get four overdrives. There is a boost jack on the pedal that you can attach to any locking grounding switch, or get one from SWELL, that allows you to switch between the full on push mode and either the sweet or low mode depending on how you have it set. That way you get Drive 1 or 2 and a lower and full out overdrive for each. You now have four overdrives all wrapped into one pedal. When switching between modes you don't get any dramatic changes in volume that would require you to change your guitar or amp settings, they just change the character of the overdrive.

There also is of course an input jack at the top of the pedal, so you don't waste valuable pedal-board real-estate and two outputs. One is an amp output and the other is a recording output that has an amp simulator built in for direct recording or for use to an amp to again tweak the flavor of the overdrive. Wow, that's a lot in a fairly small footprint.

Inside the SWELL pedals are all quality parts with things like a ceramic tube socket, Switchcraft jacks, phenolic knobs, die cast aluminum enclosure to insure complete shielding, Belden wire and Alpha pots.

Spent a bunch of time with the G-Valve. First with a variety of amps and guitars just sitting around and then using it live at two gigs our band had. I can say it was a bunch of fun. This is one warm sounding pedal. Even with the tone knob up all the way the overdrive is always warm. Also the pedal is very quiet, even with the level control and drive knobs maxed out the pedal itself was quiet. If you have a solid state amp and want to warm it up with a little of that tube mojo, the G-Valve is worth a look. Now if you already have a tube amp you are adding a stage of tube gain in front of it, which will make a single channel amp into at least a three channel one. I did find that even at the same settings the drive 2 was a little brighter than the Drive 1. I'm not sure if that is inherent in the design or because the thing is using different sides of the tube and it was differences in the tube sides. In either case it made the two drives distinctive. I also found that even when the

drive was set at the minimum there was a small boost to the signal. As you turn up the drive controls in addition to adding more drive to the pedal it also fattens up your tone. If I had to succinctly sum it up I would say it makes your sound come alive.

My favorite push setting was in the push mode. There was more low end and the sound was more in your face. Again the footswitch option allows you to get to that place and one other for contrast. One of the cool things of the pedal was it didn't color the amps I ran it through, so you could still hear your amp tone when the pedal was engaged. Also the G-Valve worked well with both clean and overdriven amps. Now some of the other models are recommended for either clean or overdriven amps but the G-Valve works with both.

I didn't run the B-Pro through its paces because I'm not a bass player. I did give it to Tom the bass player in the band I'm in to try and this is what he said. "I just spent a little time getting my first taste of this thing. Right off the bat, it sounds great. It seems to add the kind of life to the bass tone that I got from moving from the solid state Ampeg combo to the tube-pre Mesa. It sounds so much like the Mesa to me, that I want to try it through the Ampeg instead. A good A/B situation will be with the little solid-state combo. But at first blush, this thing seems to sound like a million bucks. When I was first asked to try out the B-Pro, I didn't know what to expect, or what to listen for. So I was pretty open minded—ready for whatever I might find. Was this pedal supposed to create a grinding overdrive? A bit of tube sweetness? Extra volume? I didn't know, so I plugged in and listened.

The bass I used was pretty straightforward: a Precision with a Lindy Fralin pickup (10% overwound), and flatwound strings. I tried it through two amps: an Ampeg B-100R solid state combo and a Mesa Boogie Walkabout hybrid combo (tube preamp and mosfet power section—my favorite amp). What I found was that this pedal produces a wide range of tubeyness, from clean with just a bit of creaminess, to raunched-out overdrive. What was the most useful to me was using it with a light touch—just a bit extra gain and flavor going into the Ampeg. It made a really nice improvement in that solid state amp's sound; in fact, I got a tone from the Ampeg that's very similar to the Mesa Boogie. I'd stopped using the Ampeg because the Mesa Boogie's tube warmth gives me the sound I like. A delicate adjustment to the Mesa Boogie's preamp gain puts a lot of life to my bass tone. With this pedal, I was getting the same kind of sound from the Ampeg: lively and responsive. Take the pedal back out of the equation and the Ampeg's sound left me flat. It seemed boxy and two dimensional. The pedal didn't add anything to the Mesa Boogie that it didn't already have on its own. But I was plenty impressed that it made the Ampeg combo sound like an amp that cost four times as much! Here's my nutshell: it made my inexpensive combo sound four times livelier and better!"

Back to me right before I boxed the pedals up to return to SWELL, for the fun of it I ran a guitar through the B-Pro. You know I really liked it. Even though the pedal is voiced for the frequency range of a bass it sounded really cool with a guitar. It gave the guitar this really nice bluesy tone. I would seriously consider using one as a guitar overdrive if I was looking for that sound.